

# PASTORAL TO THE CLERGY AND LAITY OF THE DIOCESE OF MEATH.

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Reprinted from the *Dublin Evening Post*, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1871.

TO THE CLERGY AND LAITY OF THE DIOCESE OF  
MEATH:—

Dearly beloved, in the very first year of our ministry, as a missionary priest in this diocese, we were an eye-witness of a cruel and inhuman eviction, which even still makes our heart bleed as often as we allow ourselves to think of it. Seven hundred human beings were driven from their homes in one day, and set adrift on the world, to gratify the caprice of one who, before God and man, probably deserved less consideration than the last and least of them. And we remember well that there was not a single shilling of rent due on the estate at the time, except by one man; and the character and acts of that man made it perfectly clear that the agent and himself quite understood each other.

The Crowbar Brigade, employed on the occasion to extinguish the hearths and demolish the homes of honest, industrious men, worked away with a will at their awful calling until evening. At length an incident occurred that varied the monotony of the grim, ghastly ruin which they were spreading all around. They stopped suddenly, and recoiled panic-stricken with terror from two dwellings which they were directed to destroy with the rest. They had just learned that a frightful typhus-fever held those houses in its grasp, and had already brought pestilence and death to their inmates. They, therefore, supplicated the agent to spare these houses a little longer; but the agent was inexorable, and insisted that the houses should come down. The ingenuity with which he extricated himself from the difficulties of the situation was characteristic alike of the heartlessness of the man and of the cruel necessities of the work in which he was engaged. He

ordered a large winnowing sheet to be secured over the beds in which the fever victims lay—fortunately they happened to be perfectly delirious at the time—and then directed the houses to be unroofed cautiously and slowly, because, he said, ‘he very much disliked the bother and discomfort of a coroner’s inquest.’ I administered the last Sacrament of the Church to four of these fever victims next day; and, save the above-mentioned winnowing sheet, there was not a roof nearer to me than the canopy of Heaven. The horrid scenes I then witnessed I must remember all my life long. The wailing of women; the screams, the terror, the consternation of children; the speechless agony of honest industrious men, wrung tears of grief from all who saw them. I saw the officers and men of a large police force, who were obliged to attend on the occasion, cry like children at beholding the cruel sufferings of the very people whom they would be obliged to butcher had they offered the least resistance. The heavy rains that usually attend the autumnal equinoxes descended in cold, copious torrents, throughout the night, and at once revealed to these houseless sufferers the awful realities of their condition. I visited them next morning, and rode from place to place administering to them all the comfort and consolation I could. The appearance of men, women, and children, as they emerged from the ruins of their former homes—saturated with rain, blackened and besmeared with soot, shivering in every member, from cold and misery—presented positively the most appalling spectacle I ever looked at. The landed proprietors, in a circle all around—and for many miles in every direction—warned their tenantry with threats of the direst vengeance, against the humanity of extending to any of them the hospitality of a single night’s shelter. Many of these poor people were unable to emigrate with their families; while, at home, the hand of every man was thus raised against them. They were driven from the land on which Providence had placed them; and, in the state of society surrounding them, every other walk of life was rigidly closed against them. What was the result? After battling in vain with privation and pestilence, they at last graduated from the workhouse to the tomb; and in little more than three years nearly a fourth of them lay quietly in their graves.

The eviction, which I have thus described and of which I was an eyewitness, must not be considered an isolated exceptional event which could occur only in a remote locality, where public opinion could not reach and expose it. The fact is quite the reverse. Every county, barony, poor-law union, and indeed every parish in the diocese, is perfectly familiar with evictions that are oftentimes surrounded by circumstances, and distinguished by traits of darker and more disgusting atrocity. Quite near the town in which I write, and in the parish in which I live, I lately passed through what might be characterised as a wilderness, in which, as far as the eye could reach, not a single human being, nor the vestige of a human habitation, was anywhere discernible. It was only with great difficulty, and much uncertainty too, that I was able to distinguish the spot on which till lately stood one of the most respectable houses of this parish. A few miles farther on I fell in with the scene of another extensive clearance, in which the houses that had sheltered three hundred human beings were razed to the ground some few years ago. The same proprietor desolated in an adjoining parish a densely-populated district, by batches of so many families in each of a series of successive clearances. Seventeen families formed the first batch. But there are other public unquestionable facts which demonstrate the enormous injustice of these clearances, without wearying ourselves with their disgusting details.

From the year 1851 to 1861 there was a decrease of 51,000 in the population of Meath and Westmeath alone; that is to say, more than one-fifth of the population of these two counties vanished completely in ten years. The Census Reports from 1851 to 1871 have not yet been published; but there are solid reasons for fearing that they will reveal a still greater ratio of decrease. Now, in these two counties there are no manufactories, and no branch of industry worth mention. With the exception of some few score who earn their bread within doors, the population is entirely and purely agricultural, passionately attached to the soil and to the locality they were born in. The Census Reports, therefore, demonstrate the existence, in the midst of us, of some permanent, evil power, which in those two counties alone, has actually destroyed, and is actually destroying us still, in the frightful

ratio of more than 50,000 in every ten years. A sentence of eviction from the land (in a state of society in which, without the land, it is impossible to support life) is tantamount to a sentence of slow but certain execution; and hence it is very difficult to distinguish in thought between the system of wholesale clearances—and a system of wholesale murder. Unjust laws have divided us into a class on the one side, and the vast mass of the people on the other. The class were armed with absolute, unlimited, and irresponsible powers; and, as they used these powers in utter contempt of justice and humanity, the people necessarily became their victims. And the very Governments that thus armed the class, and hurled them with bitterest animosity against the masses—to exterminate and destroy them—expressed themselves shocked, horrified, and scandalised, because the people did not submit themselves to the operation peaceably and without a murmur. They imputed to a detestable perverseness of the Celtic character the Celt's unwillingness to suffer himself to be robbed and murdered unresistingly. But, surely, the worm only obeys his instinct when he turns upon the camel that treads upon him. When the people saw themselves given up to their destroyer by the very authorities that were bound to protect them, they instinctively fell back upon their own resources, and turned upon their oppressors with the energy and frenzy of despair. The very instincts of nature taught them to collect their scattered energies into confederations which would organise, develop, and utilise them. In fact, the situation was virtually a state of civil war between the nation and a class—the people keeping purely on the defensive. The church never ceased to interfere between the belligerents, and the duties of her missions were most delicate and difficult. It taxed all her charity, all her prudence, and all her divine power of persuasion to the utmost, to put her on an equality with the difficulties of her position. It is a very arduous task to reason into patience and resignation a man who once enjoyed plenty and affluence in the home in which he was born, and from which he was unjustly expelled; who now sees his wife and children slowly tortured to death by starvation, in spite of all his efforts to save them. It is a splendid achievement if you persuade him to bridle his rage and restrain his arm on an occasion in which he can retaliate on his oppressor with

deadliest effect and perfect security. Yet even ourselves have often reasoned with, and succeeded with such men; and, with the help of God's powerful grace, have often persuaded them to show mercy and forgiveness to enemies against whom every instinct, every feeling, and every passion of mere nature cried aloud for retaliation and vengeance.

Although the Church did not then, and could not at any time deny the cruel injustice with which the people were persecuted, she uniformly exhorted, after the example of our Divine Lord, to patience and forgiveness in the endurance of unjust suffering. Therefore, she combated Ribbonism from the very beginning, on the ground of its being inconsistent with the perfect forgiveness of enemies, and with the higher perfection recommended in the Gospel. But the Ribbonism that at present prevails, besides degenerating into a totally different form from what it had been formerly, contradicts directly not merely the counsels of the Gospel, but strikes at the very root of Christianity itself. Ribbonism, as an organisation, is the necessary and logical result of bad land laws, and of the tyranny of bad landlords. If it was the injustice of bad landlords that first created it, so it was their cleverness and sagacity to advance their own interests, that nurtured and fostered it into the pernicious energy and activity that all good men now deplore. Whenever Ribbonism became really dangerous and formidable they purchased up its most influential members; and through the exertions of these hired traitors—or the secret information supplied by them—they were enabled to carry out all their projected clearances with increased security and confidence. It is a matter of notoriety that two of the most cruel and extensive exterminators in this diocese had been centres of Ribbonism in their respective districts while carrying their inhuman clearances through. I have before me what I cannot but regard as solid ground for believing that the relations still subsisting between exterminating landlordism and Ribbonism are the very reverse of unfriendly. This fact forcibly reveals the real character of Ribbonism in a social point of view; but in a moral point of view it is quite detestable. Ribbonism occupies itself, just now, principally in sending threatening letters, and in serving threatening notices, in paying domiciliary visits, and breaking into peaceful families; in extorting from their affrighted

members—generally under the sanction of an oath—promises that either cannot be fulfilled at all, or not fulfilled without sin and injustice; in gratifying the vengeance of someone unknown, whose displeasure they incurred; in shooting down men—and even women—whenever the operation could be performed with safety. The shooting of landlords, except in cases and for motives of fierce personal revenge, is, for reasons already suggested, seldom or never attempted now. The shooting of policemen, or of persons near police barracks, is manifestly a difficult and dangerous proceeding; and the cases that are alleged seem to be received with the most perfect incredulity in the very districts in which they are said to have occurred. But process-servers, cattle-dealers, and honest men who refuse to part with their properties, or surrender their farms—because somebody else occupied them twenty or thirty years ago—are the class from which Ribbonism now selects its victims. Their lives can be taken with comparative safety.

Now to take away the life of an unjust aggressor—in a case of necessary self-defence, and when you cannot preserve your own life without taking away his—is by no means a sinful act, no matter how much, on other grounds, you regret and deplore it. But to take away the life of a man who has not unjustly assailed you, either in your person or property, or to take away the life of an unjust aggressor, when you have other means by which you can successfully defend your property and preserve your life, is to commit the awful crime of murder. Where there has been no unjust aggression there can be no necessary self-defence; and to take away life without the justification of necessary self-defence is the very definition of murder. Now, that fierce, inhuman determination to root out and extinguish the Irish race has certainly passed away years ago. For years past, there has been, throughout the empire, a universal awakening to a sense of the justice due to Ireland. Our wrongs and our grievances were acknowledged in the Legislature last year, and a generous—though incomplete and unsuccessful—effort made to redress them. It is now universally confessed that it would be the height of folly, as it had always been the height of wickedness, to sacrifice the rights of the nation to the interests of a class. Were it not for the misgovernment

of past years, the Diocese of Meath could, in a crisis of our country's fortune, furnish a *corps d'armée* that would cheerfully encounter, with the chivalrous bravery of their race, and with every prospect of success, a whole division of the Prussian army. How that Prussian division would enjoy the resistance they should encounter from the immense herds of sheep and oxen that have superseded men. There is no sane man that does not now see that it would be supremely perilous to the very existence of the empire, to allow landlords to revel in the luxury of these inhuman clearances any longer.

Instances of isolated individual oppression will always be; but the wholesale injustice which provoked a rising, and an enrolment of the masses of the nation in Ribbon societies—for self-defence—is henceforth an impossibility. The circumstances, therefore, that called Ribbonism into existence, and that ever lent to it even an appearance of justice, have now passed away for ever. Hence the principle of aggregation in the Ribbonism of the present day is not a purpose of necessary self-defence, but a purpose of positive and unjust aggression. Ribbonmen do not now combine to fight for their own lives, when unjustly assailed, but to attack unjustly, and take away the lives of others, whom they had not the slightest human or divine right to injure. Now, a secret society that blasphemously arrogates to itself the awful power of life and death, and, under the pretext of redressing public wrong, actually enrolls its members with the horrible object of taking away the life of every man that differs with, disobeys, or displeases them—is, in reality, a society organised for the diabolical purposes of committing murder. By the very fact, therefore, of becoming a member of such society, a man constitutes himself a murderer in intention, and contracts at once, in the eyes of God, the accumulated guilt of the murders which he may be subsequently called to commit. Hence, to sanction such a society, or to lend any encouragement to its propagation—or even not to oppose its progress, when you can do so—is to co-operate positively or negatively with the murderous designs of its members, to participate in their guilt, and to share in the judgment that awaits the assassin. A considerable portion of this Pastoral has been devoted to a defence of the Ribbonism of former times from the obloquy and infamy with

which, in our judgment, it has been branded; and it is only in the highest interests of truth, justice, and religion, that we could bring ourselves to say such hard words of the Ribbonism now prevailing. No tyrant of ancient or of modern times ever yet exercised the power of life or death with such contempt for the dictates of justice and humanity as these secret societies against which we are now warning you.

Everything that is noble and generous in human nature rises up in rebellion against the intolerable amount of arbitrary and irritating injustice ordinarily embodied in the demands they make. How can an honourable or upright man bring himself to surrender a farm, on which he has for years been expending his capital, his skill, and his labour, at the mere bidding of an unknown assassin, and simply because somebody else occupied and surrendered possession of it years ago? It may also be the sole or principal source from which he derives means to maintain and educate his family. He cannot, therefore—even to save his life—surrender it without dishonouring himself and doing a grievous injustice to his family. He knows, however, the doom that awaits him; that the assassin is inexorable, and that consequently he may, at any moment, be massacred. He must therefore live on, on sufferance—in a perpetual agony of suspense and apprehension. The slightest appearance of danger fills him with mortal alarm; his death-knell is continually ringing in his ears; and at every moment of his life he really endures all the tortures of actual assassination. The guilt or innocence of their victims is a matter of no consequence with societies whose principle it is to take away men's lives without the preliminary formality of judge or jury. They do not require that the crime for which they murder you should be proved or even inquired into. You may have violated no law, human or divine, and you may be able, by three words of explanation, to satisfy even themselves that you never even thought of the act for which they are going to pass sentence of death upon you. God Almighty never yet gave to any authority on earth the right to take away the life of even the greatest criminal till his guilt was fully and satisfactorily established. Yet these impious secret societies murder innocent men, without allowing to them even the right of trying to vindicate their innocence.



But if we glance for a moment at the supernatural aspect of those outrages the view they present is very saddening indeed. Conservative journals ordinarily regard these agrarian murders as so many landlord martyrdoms. Herod's wholesale massacre is not admitted to have done so much for the justification of the innocents as is claimed for these modern agrarian murders. A heartless exterminator, an avowed oppressor, an extortioner—by the very fact of being assassinated—becomes the most just, the most generous, the most indulgent of landlords. Well, admitting them to have been all that Conservative journals represent them, who is it that is ever murdered at a time in which he is prepared for judgment? What murdered man has breathed forth his soul with forgiveness and charity in his heart, and, like St. Stephen, with a prayer for mercy on his lips? Do they not rather expire with fierce hatred and a thirst for vengeance; and does not their very blood cry aloud to heaven for justice? Thus, inflamed with rancour, without the smallest warning or a moment's preparation, they are hurried into eternity just when they least expect it. Is it any rashness then to suppose that the bullet that pierced the mortal body has murdered for ever the immortal soul? Secret societies are thus awfully wicked; and as they are more over supremely perilous, their members must be infatuated not to feel alarmed for their personal safety. By becoming a member, you place your head in the halter that may at any moment strangle you. For how can there be truth, or loyalty, or honour in these unholy alliances that repudiate and deride the sacredness of moral obligations?

The history of secret societies is no more than a sickening recital of the diabolical artifices with which clever villains, with patriotism on their lips and treachery in their hearts, courted and won the confidence of our poor countrymen, for the purpose of afterwards sending them to the convict-ship or to the scaffold. And the Ribbon and other secret societies of the present day literally swarm with hired spies, with perjured traitors, and purchased informers, who are only waiting for the occasion that will make it worth their while to traffic in the liberties, the lives, and the blood of their dupes. And when those heartless traitors, very shortly, perhaps, shall have deceived, betrayed, and surrendered them up, the loud, passionate cry with which society

will insist upon their punishment will be marked neither by moderation nor by justice. Every man now fears that scores of assassins are secretly and stealthily lurking about in the very midst of us. The mystery in which they have shrouded themselves, and with which they have hitherto successfully concealed themselves has spread terror and alarm among all classes of society. Every man is in terror for his life, and trembles for his safety. When, therefore, society shall have learned that spies and informers have at length given them up to justice, the greater and more painful men's fears are now, the louder will be the cry calling for the utter extirpation of this pest. Let these secret societies then beware; they must soon be detected, and society will show them no mercy.

We feel much pleasure in bearing testimony to the justice, the impartiality, and even the moderation of the Civil Magistracy throughout the diocese generally; but we regret being obliged to add that there are very many exceptions to this rule. In certain districts of this diocese, the justice and impartiality of the magistracy are by no means above suspicion; and, consequently, the administration of justice does not inspire the confidence that is desirable. Indeed, these gentlemen seem to regard the confidence, the contentment, and the gratitude of the people as things of no consequence whatever. Their theory is, that the Celt can be governed successfully, not through his affections, but through his fears; and hence that his feelings or sympathies—one side or the other—are of no value. Hence they keep up a perpetual cry for Coercion Acts, for Peace Preservation Acts, for Pecuniary Indemnifications for all sorts of outrages, and especially for the permanent presence of a strong, imposing police force. They are constantly on the look-out for real or imaginary outrages to make a case against the people, and to establish a necessity for giving up to their safe keeping and disposal our properties, our liberties, and our lives. Now, the most damaging accusation that can be brought home to these secret societies is the fact that they have fallen in with the views, co-operated with the efforts, and immensely forwarded the designs which bitter and hereditary enemies have upon the liberties, the lives, and the freedom of the people. No doubt, our enemies have exaggerated the outrages that really occurred, and supplemented

them immeasurably with outrages that never occurred. But those that unquestionably have occurred strengthened, encouraged, and emboldened them to audaciously demand our enslavement by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. We fear that before many days we shall witness those secret societies co-operating with a weak and pusillanimous Executive, in handing over the people, in many places, to the tender mercies of a party that was never yet known to exercise absolute power with moderation, or with a due sense of the responsibility accompanying it.

But the most arbitrary and unjust concession with which any Government tried to conciliate the political fanaticism of any party, is the imposition of an extra police force. What can be more unjust than to tax, to fine, and absolutely to ruin the peaceful inhabitants of a locality, for the commission of a crime of which they absolutely knew nothing—which no human wisdom could have foreseen, and no human power could have prevented? Does the Executive expect that murderers will forbear and desist from crime from a feeling of remorse, or from a sense of their responsibility in bringing ruin on so many innocent persons? Experience has now made it abundantly evident that the presence of the extra police force has not the slightest effect in the prevention, the detection, or the punishment of crime. The outrage attempted on Mr. Nicholson some months ago, on the public road, and in broad daylight, proves that the presence of an armed policeman will not save a man from being shot in his own carriage; and that every attempt to apprehend and punish the murderer may completely fail. But punishment and crime are correlative terms; and hence the punishment of a whole community in any district supposes that the vast majority of its inhabitants have actually perpetrated, or at least sanctioned, approved, and lent an encouragement that made all morally responsible, and all morally guilty of crime. Now, the imposition of an extra police force in any loyal and peaceable district, is only another name for the imposition of a very heavy pecuniary fine, the infliction of a very severe and galling punishment. To quarter, therefore, an extra police force upon any loyal and law-abiding locality, is not merely an injustice and a wrong that ruins multitudes of honest industrious men, but a slander that blackens their character,

that blasts their reputation, and holds them up to the execration of the empire as murderers, or, at least, as the abettors and approvers of murder. If it has been our duty to warn you against these secret societies, it was our duty, too, to protest against the excesses into which an indiscreet zeal might lead the Government in suppressing and crushing them.

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Bishop of Meath.  
Mullingar, February 20, 1871.